**Arab Spring really was social media revolution**

Kate Taylor – TG Daily

After analyzing more than three million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts, a new study has concluded that the Arab Spring truly was fueled by social media.

"Our evidence suggests that social media carried a [flood] of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for the success of political uprising,” says Philip Howard, an associate professor in communication at the University of Washington.

"People who shared interest in democracy built extensive social networks and organized political action. Social media became a critical part of the toolkit for greater freedom."

During the week before Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, for example, the total rate of tweets about political change in Egypt [increased] ten-fold.

And videos featuring protest and political commentary went viral, with the top 23 receiving nearly five and a half million views. The amount of content produced online by opposition groups, in Facebook and political blogs, increased dramatically.

In Tunisia, twenty percent of blogs were evaluating Ben Ali’s leadership the day he resigned from office, up from just five percent the month before. Subsequently, the primary topic for Tunisian blogs was 'revolution'.

As for Egypt, in the two weeks after Mubarak’s resignation, there was an average of 2,400 tweets a day from people in neighboring countries about the political situation in Egypt. In Tunisia after Ben Ali’s resignation, there were about 2,200 tweets a day.

“In other words, people throughout the region were drawn into an extended conversation about social uprising," says Howard.

"The success of demands for political change in Egypt and Tunisia led individuals in other countries to pick up the conversation. It helped create discussion across the region."

Ironically, says Howard, government efforts to crack down on social media may have incited more public activism, especially in Egypt. People who were isolated by efforts to shut down the internet, mostly middle-class Egyptians, may have gone to the streets when they could no longer follow the unrest through social media.

"Recent events show us that the public sense of shared grievance and potential for change can develop rapidly," he says.

"These dictators for a long time had many political enemies, but they [were not united]. So opponents used social media to identify goals, build solidarity and organize demonstrations."